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A PARADIGM OF COMMITMENT: TOWARD PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FOR LIBRARIANS

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ABSTRACT

Librarianship is not fully recognized as a profession. In order to gain the full professional recognition and autonomy that it deserves, librarianship must develop a new awareness and conception of itself and its potential. Its definition of "service" must change. Librarians must develop an integrated set of common values at a field level and be willing to live by them, even if conflict is the result. They must think of themselves as a collectivity instead of a collection of individuals under a professional guise. Their present values must change from tacit, implicit ones of individuals to overt, explicit values of the field.

Several years ago a sociologist by the name of William J. Goode discussed the professional nature of librarianship. He felt that librarianship falls somewhere in the middle of a professional-non-professional continuum. To him, librarianship was engaged in a struggle for full professional recognition.

In this struggle, he felt librarianship had certain advantages. One, librarianship is a full-time occupation specializing in a certain area and is not subordinate to any other group in the same situs, such as nursing is to doctoring in medicine. Related to this is that librarians have a sense that their occupation is unique. Two, librarians are closely attached to learning, which is a prime source of occupational prestige in our society. In addition, an increasing number of librarians are trained in professional schools, some of which are associated with universities and offer a doctorate. Three, librarians belong to professional associations, at local, state, and national levels. Four, librarians have formulated a code of ethics.

But Goode did feel that librarianship lacked two key attributes that keep it from becoming fully accepted as a profession. One is a prolonged specialized training in an abstract body of knowledge. Two is a collectivity or service orientation, in terms of professionally defined "needs" of its clients, rather than what its clients simply "want." I shall explain.

In terms of the knowledge base, Goode maintained that librarianship had failed to develop a general body of scientific knowledge dealing with information storage and retrieval, but depended upon rather rule-of-thumb, local regulations and rules, plus a major cataloging system for most of its day-to-day work. Even now, some librarians express

doubt about the importance of formal education for librarianship. Goode maintained that the public did not believe that the librarian has a knowledge base specific to his occupation. He felt that the public views librarians as gatekeepers and custodians to a "stock room" of books and periodicals. This aspect, if true, seems to be intensified by the fact that the public largely meets only the un-skilled and semi-skilled help in libraries and judges the trained librarians, who work mostly away from the eyes of the public, by the performance of the help. Even today, some librarians seem to be particularly sensitive to being referred to as "gatekeepers" or some similar term. This is not to deny that others particularly seem to be proud of being called "bookkeepers." According to Goode, another factor related to the knowledge base is that the librarian begins to assume administrative tasks earlier than in most other occupations. Much of this administration is not specific to librarianship, for it consists instead of integrating human beings in a corporate enterprise and not in pushing back the frontiers of knowledge in the field. Some librarians even argue that such an administrative emphasis is properly a central task of librarians. In fact, status or prestige today seems to be achieved in the field mostly by administration, that is in taking on more administrative responsibility rather than being distinguished as a specialist.

Without a firm knowledge base and its recognition by the relevant publics, librarians can not easily claim autonomy and control over their own affairs. Closely related to this is the definition of service orientation that most librarians give themselves. Most librarians abdicate much of their autonomy from the start in an effort to please their

clients. "Serving" the client means "helping," learning his wishes and satisfying them. "Serving" does not seem to mean, to librarians in general, defining what is best for the client in terms of some set of professional standards of concern and giving that to the client. The librarian works within his client's wishes, instead of imposing his professional categories, conceptions, and authority on his clients. In other words, librarians seem to respond to the expressed "desires" of clients instead of the "needs" of clients as defined by a body of professional library knowledge.

But this is not to say that no conflict exists between librarians and their clients, nor is it to say the client always gets his way. For my M.S. work, I studied the status concerns of a group of professional librarians working in a large university library. I found that the librarians were concerned and threatened with their status and that this concern was reflected in conflict with their clients. I found that the more librarians were concerned about the status of their field the more they reported and seemed to have conflict with clients that might be regarded as being a threat to their own status. For instance, in regard to faculty some librarians made these folowing observations:

> ...We threaten them--they feel our ignorance is so great that we are a danger to them and the system...
>
> ...they have a low opinion of a professional librarian.
>
> I think the faculty has a feeling that librarians are incompetent in their areas. They look down at librarians for their lack of academic degree background.
>
> I have a feeling that many times the faculty think we do not know what we are talking about. They have a feeling that librarians cannot possibly know what materials they want...

Faculty members use the library only from their own point of view ....There is an interpretation of rules so as to benefit their own areas...

...There is a tendency on the part of the faculty to dominate both the security and staff of the library. Many librarians do not have control over the issuing of keys to the library, thereby directly influencing the attrition rate of their respective collections... Faculty thinks RHIP, rank has its privileges, and that rules are for other people.

...faculty members refuse to learn how to use the library. They have a feeling of "instantism." That is, everyone having his own copy of a book. There is a backlash and the faculty blowing up for some minor thing happening in the library...

They are unreasonable. Some of them use cuss words on the phone and demand things that we can't give under the university code and policy...

...the librarians become a whipping boy for faculty frustrations...

Do these statements sound familiar in your own context?

I found that the persons who reported the greatest amounts of conflict were those who were most concerned about being professionals. They were the persons who wanted more autonomy for themselves and their field. They felt that library associations were important and should be even more important. These were the persons who reported their work as being of utmost importance in their life. These were not the castaways of the field. These were librarians who regarded themselves as professionals.

There is a myth, I think, that still exists to a certain degree in librarianship. It says there is no real grounds of conflict between librarians and the public they serve. It says that apparent conflicts are due primarily to a lack of communication and to a surplus of misunderstanding. According to this view, the problems librarians experience with their clients could be solved by improved human relations. It seems to assume that conflict per se is bad and non-conflict per se is good.

But the situation is not this simple. Real grounds of differences exist between librarians and their clients. I will try to illustrate what I mean.

First of all, there are differences between clients. Take the general area of sciences for example. I choose this area because quite a lot of research about information needs and uses has been made focusing on scientists.

Younger scientists may differ in their information needs and uses from older scientists. It may be that younger men in attempting to freshly master a field may depend more heavily upon written sources than older men. The older men, having had time to establish a niche in their discipline, may rely more heavily upon invisible colleges of colleagues and verbal communications.

Regardless of age, some persons will be more oriented toward success in terms of their discipline, others in terms of their employer. Success in terms of the discipline means doing research and keeping up to date with the latest scientific fashions. Success in terms of the employer means "local" orientations. Differences in the nature and types of information desired by persons with these different orientations is to be expected.

A person's work and work conditions are probably very important for him and his information needs. His work and work conditions give him a social context, an identity, and affect his entire life cycle. His occupational performance, expectations, and interests are affected by factors such as educational level, marital status, sex, and age, plus factors such as his department's prestige, his controls over his work, the extent of teamwork, and departmental community. Glaser, in

a study of organizational scientists found different constellations of working conditions, variations in career concerns, and differences in perceived recognition related to each hierarchical position in an organization. Andrews found that scientific performance is related to the amount of time a person spends on technical work, teaching, or administration. Shepherd found that differences between scientists and engineers seem to revolve largely around identification and conditions of work.

There are other differences in the disciplines too. For example, creativity reaches a maximum at different ages in different disciplines. The evidence in general indicates that chemists can be expected to make their major contribution before their thirties or not at all. Individuals in other areas, such as geology, may be expected to make their major contributions much later in life.

In short, there are differences between clients. These differences are related to a whole host of factors. These differences can be expected to be reflected in the nature and types and maybe even amounts of information needs and uses. There is no "public;" there are hosts of "publics" each with their own unique demands.

This is not a point to be taken lightly. I know of the case of a person who had an article rejected within the past two years by the editor of a major library journal, because he had found statistical differences in information needs and uses existing between faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates in a university. The reason the editor gave for rejection was that the policy of the journal is to emphasize similarities of information needs, rather than differences. Remember that point!

Today there are great pressures toward publication. Competitive pressure for priority in science is so great that there is a rush to get into print even before an experiment has actually been performed. One might think there is hardly time left for research with all the reprints, requests for reprints, prepublication copies, inquiries concerning published work, correspondence relating to general scientific issues, journals, books, pamphlets, technical reports, grant requests, conferences, and other forms of written or printed communications. To top it off, the half-life of research in science, the time in which half of the research done becomes obsolete, is decreasing. At present, in the bulk of the natural sciences it is only about five years.

There is an explosion of information and a problem of handling it. Some have tried to cope with the explosion by proposing the use of qualitative control devices. In general, these proposals place the burden of control on journal editors who evaluate articles for publication. This approach restricts the number of articles per journal but probably increases the number of journals. In addition, information regarded as "insignificant" in a given context today may be regarded as "invaluable" at some future date. There is a problem of values and the change of values. Other proposals emphasize the improvement of information dissemination and retrieval. An effort is made not to stem the avalanche but to disperse it. This is viewed to be not the job of editors but of librarians and other information specialists. These proposals tend to view the librarian as the efficient technician who has no part in the information process except to handle the "dirty" details of

information distribution. Despite the high-sounding rhetoric the librarian becomes the "water boy" on the team, an efficient handler of information, but little else.

But in my mind, librarians are much more. They not only handle information, they create and destroy it. They select it. They evaluate it. They give priorities to it.

Librarians have value commitments and their choices are not unbiased. Let us say that a librarian has five-hundred dollars to spend. The physics department wants a reference book that costs almost the full amount. The history department wants some early works which costs about five-hundred dollars. Who gets the priority? How does the librarian decide? Is history more important than physics or vice versa? If a librarian decides on some sort of compromise, what values does he use to decide who gets what? Is a compromise a "good" thing? Why? As librarians, you know that you make similar decisions nearly everyday. You decide, within certain limits, who gets what. You are faced with limits of time, finances, etc. Within the contexts of these limits, you make choices about what knowledge is to be available.

Alvin W. Weinberg, who was chairman of the President's Science Advisory Committee, said, that "those who control information will become a dominant priesthood in the science of the future." He is right. If your choices emphasize certain areas of science, those areas will benefit to the possible detriment of other areas. If your choices emphasize science areas, humantiies areas may unduly suffer as a result. In part, your choices determine the areas of knowledge of the present and of the future. You are part of the process of knowledge creation and destruction.

Our world is faced with many problems today. There are problems of pollution, civil rights, foreign policy, health, housing, age, business, labor, taxes, etc. Which areas receive what priorities? By the choices you make everyday, you choose the areas and the priorities. What is the "ideal" society? Whether you realize it or not, your choices are helping create it. If you try to please the interests of everyone, you may not satisfy anyone--including yourself. If you try to please all the interests of one person, you will probably let all the rest suffer. But whatever you do, you are doing it. You are making moral and ethical decisions about "the good life."

But librarianship does not have this sense of moral urgency and awareness. It seems to lack a sense of drama. It lacks a task, a destiny, a set of issues about which it is concerned. Have you ever read your code of ethics passed in 1939? It is not a code of ethics. It is a series of run-of-the-mill administrative and personnel policies. To put it in current student terminology, it is also one of the most milktoast, establishment oriented documents a person may ever get to read. Change, even if it is necessary, is to be avoided. For instance, the "final jurisdiction of the library rests in the officially constituted governing authority." What other profession would tolerate such a statement? This is similar to saying that a doctor is not supposed to decide what is best for his patients interests. The cheif administrator of the hospital is to decide if a patient needs an operation or a drug. The doctor is then only supposed to carry out the administrator's decision, even if it kills the patient. Preposterous! No wonder the public considers libraries but not librarians important. Here we now have an amoral person making moral decisions which he pretends he does not make.

Yet many of us would condemn the soldiers at My Lai for this very act. Librarians are then functionaries for somebody else's business.

What other profession is so concerned about lay opinion that it would fail to have its own soul? The code, for instance, urges fairness and wisdom in book acquisition, a rather wishy-washy exortation, but does not assert the simple ethical duty to follow professional principles in this matter and to treat lay opinion as irrelevant and incompetent. To the extent librarians view their duty as giving people what they want, instead of what they need as defined by the profession, to that extent librarians are clerks and not professionals. Of course librarians must take the wishes of their clients into account, but would a doctor allow a patient to have poison just because he desires it?

Librarians have an obligation to educate their clients. As a profession and as individuals they must have a commitment to run personal risks to fulfill their high obligation to society. They must be willing to face complaints in terms of an integrated set of professional values, instead of having an exaggerated sensitivity to them. They must risk unpopularity if it is necessary to serve the larger interests of the society.

I am not talking about censorship. Librarians are doing that already at an individual level. By their individual choices, they emphasize certain areas to the detriment of others. In some cases librarians may not acquire materials they think they should because it would arouse too much criticism, and the librarian could be fired. After all, if his constituency rejects him, he can not turn to another clientele and his

profession is not integrated in its values to protect him from the laymen. If librarians are to be fully professional, they must develop commitments that apply to the profession as a whole. The profession must develop values as to which areas of knowledge have priority. Value commitments must become explicit and supported at the level of the field and not just be implicit decisions of the fields' individual practitioners. Librarians must develop a consciousness of what they are. They are not just clerks. They are an indispensable element in the creation, preservation, and loss of knowledge and values. With the increasing explosion of knowledge, librarians are more and more becoming in the position of high priests of society. They have the obligation and responsibility to speak out on the values society should have. If air traffic controllers feel public safety is endangered, they strike. They face up to their values. Would a librarian strike? At present I think not. But are not human attitudes, ideas, knowledge, and minds at least as valuable as human bodies?

Of course, some would argue that the client has as much right as the professional to assert his values. I would agree. Ultimately, a profession justifies itself by showing that the values of the profession are in harmony with at least the long term interests of its clients and the society. So long as a profession controls and regulates itself so as to help its clients and the society in a way they can not help themselves, it is allowed the autonomy it needs and seeks. When a so-called "profession" fails to regulate itself, then society regulates it. If it has no essential core of values, then society may not even need to regulate it. Why should a library client even worry about librarianship now? The public probably sees no way in which it can be saved or

hurt by librarians. After all, as it is now, librarianship is not allowed to control itself and apparently needs not be controlled by others. There is no smoke, because there is no fire.

Librarians must develop a consciousness of themselves. They must assume their importance and work toward their acceptance. They can not be scabs to each other. When a librarian is in effect fired by a department after twenty years of work in that department for alleged incompetence, librarians should not allow that to happen. They should decide for themselves in terms of their values if a co-librarian is actually incompetent. Even a union would not allow a co-worker to be fired unless they felt it was just. And would they allow a fellow union member to take over the fired man's job, if they felt the man was unjustly fired? I think not. How can librarians even call themselves professionals when they rush in to take over a fellow professional's job, who was unjustly fired by the professions' own standards? And how can library administrators allow such a situation to happen unless their identity for their employer is greater thean their commitment to their field? Until librarians as a group develop a clear sense of professional identity and are willing to commit their lives to it, they will remain the prostitutes that they appear to be.

Now, I am not saying that conflict is an end in itself. But a certain amount of creative tension may be necessary if librarianship is to fully experience its potential. Once librarianship defines its values, those values may be a threat to others. Tension may then result. But if the tension is avoided at all costs, whatever values librarianship has will disappear. With no values, librarianship will be no

threat and there will be no tension. Tension indicates values, commitment, and a moral struggle.

No longer can librarians work as individuals under the guise of a field. As a group they must work together for the recognition they deserve as being an indispensable part of the knowledge process. This struggle may cost them and cost them a lot, but they dare not avoid it. It is for their interest and the interest of their society that they meet the challenge.

It is not a question of librarians becoming professional or not. They must be professional. Their position now is not inherent. They are not inherently clerks, custodians, or cop-outs. They are potentially priests. Librarians must recognize that they can change their position, if they will. In fact, from my point of view they must.

But the question is are they - are you - willing to pay the price?

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BIOGRAPHY

Lemuel Carroll DeWeese, III, is with the Purdue University School of Industrial Engineering as both an Associate in Research and a Teaching Assistant. Presently, he is teaching a course entitled "Engineering Administration". He is completing his Ph.D. in sociology. As part of an Operations Research team which is supported by a National Science Foundation grant "Operations Analysis of Information Systems". Currently he is engaged in a study of an organizational analysis of information needs and uses of faculty members from behavioral perspective. He has completed studies in information use and professionalization among librarians. In the latter subject, he strongly emphasized librarian's status concerns.

Mr. DeWeese has published a bibliography of library use studies plus several articles about librarian professionalism in Indiana Chapter Special Libraries Association Slant and AAUP Purdue Chapter Forum. An article is pending in College and Research Libraries. He has also co-authored a thre-dimensional contingency-table analysis computer program designed primarily for research use in sociology. His other academic interests lie chiefly in sociological theory and socio-cultural change.

The American Anthropological Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Association of University Professors, Alpha Kappa Delta, and Phi Kappa Phi are just a few many honararies and professional associations in which Mr. DeWeese has been actively involved.

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